

2016

## Sexuality

Scott J. McKinnon

*University of Wollongong*, [scottmck@uow.edu.au](mailto:scottmck@uow.edu.au)

Andrew W. Gorman-Murray

*University of Western Sydney*, [andrewgm@uow.edu.au](mailto:andrewgm@uow.edu.au)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McKinnon, Scott J. and Gorman-Murray, Andrew W., "Sexuality" (2016). *Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers*. 3575.

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/3575>

---

# Sexuality

## Abstract

This chapter investigates sexuality as an individual and collective identity category. The notion of sexual identity is a particularly modern mode of identity and belonging originating in the West in the late nineteenth century and proliferating and transforming over the twentieth century. In this chapter, we explore how sexuality operates as a point of identity and belonging by, firstly, tracing the emergence of sexuality as the basis of personal and collective identities in the West. Once seen as behaviours or acts, sexual desires would gradually be framed in discourse as a critical and innate element of one's being. This discursive framing has seen the emergence of spatially enacted communities of desire in which a sense of belonging is derived from shared sexual identities. We then discuss how globalisation has worked .on and through sexuality as an identity category, noting the possibilities and problems in interactions between the local and the global. We conclude with an examination of the website of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA). By exploring ways in which this site both encourages and embodies a sense .of belonging to a globalised community based on minority sexual and gender identities, we consider the political potential and inherent complexities within such an imagined online community.

## Keywords

sexuality

## Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## Publication Details

McKinnon, S. & Gorman-Murray, A. (2016). Sexuality. In K. Huppatz, M. Hawkins & A. Matthews (Eds.), *Identity and Belonging* (pp. 57-70). London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.

- This chapter provides some examples of the ways in which gender identities vary across culture and time. Can you think of any more examples? Perhaps you have even witnessed changes within your own lifetime.
- How has feminism changed over the years? What role has globalisation played in its incarnations?

### Recommended reading

- Butler, J. (1999) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge).
- Connell, R. and Messerschmidt, J. (2012) 'Hegemonic Masculinity', in Lorber, Judith (ed.) *Gender Inequality* (Fifth Edition) (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Jackson, S. and Scott, S. (eds.) (2002) *Gender: A Sociological Reader* (London: Routledge).
- Kimmel, M. and Aronson, A. (eds.) (2004) *The Gendered Society Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press).

## CHAPTER 5

# Sexuality

Scott McKinnon and Andrew Gorman-Murray

### Introduction

This chapter investigates sexuality as an individual and collective identity category. The notion of sexual identity is a particularly modern mode of identity and belonging originating in the West in the late nineteenth century and proliferating and transforming over the twentieth century. In this chapter, we explore how sexuality operates as a point of identity and belonging by, firstly, tracing the emergence of sexuality as the basis of personal and collective identities in the West. Once seen as behaviours or acts, sexual desires would gradually be framed in discourse as a critical and innate element of one's being. This discursive framing has seen the emergence of spatially enacted communities of desire in which a sense of belonging is derived from shared sexual identities. We then discuss how globalisation has worked on and through sexuality as an identity category, noting the possibilities and problems in interactions between the local and the global. We conclude with an examination of the website of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA). By exploring ways in which this site both encourages and embodies a sense of belonging to a globalised community based on minority sexual and gender identities, we consider the political potential and inherent complexities within such an imagined online community.

### The emergence of sexuality as a form of identity

Same-sex sexual desire and romantic attachment are, of course, nothing new. As argued by Robert Aldrich, 'Since time immemorial and throughout the world, some men and women have felt a desire for emotional and physical intimacy with those of the same sex' (Aldrich, 2010, p. 1). What are new – or, at least, relatively recent in historical terms – are the forms of collective identity developed by people who feel these desires. What were once seen simply as sexual acts have become the basis of personal identities and feelings of belonging to a larger community. A significant shift in understandings,

experiences and discourses of sexuality has seen a set of behaviours become the basis of forms of identity (Foucault, 1976). These identities are historically and geographically constituted, emerging in different ways at different times and substantially shifting and re-forming since they first became apparent in the Western world (Weeks, 1981). Homosexual behaviours have become critical indicators not only of what we may do, but of who we may be. The emergence of 'the homosexual' as a category of person has equally seen the emergence of its binary opposite, 'the heterosexual'.

These identity categories initially emerged in the West in the late nineteenth century. During this time, a number of British, European and American researchers began to posit the idea that the homosexual was a distinct category of person. The word 'homosexuality' was not used until the 1860s, gaining increased prominence in the writings of Havelock Ellis in the 1880s and 1890s (Weeks, 1981). In Ellis's native Britain, sex between men was criminalised and harshly punished but had generally been seen as a temporary aberration rather than an indicator of belonging to a distinct social category. Although small subcultures existed, a public identity based on same-sex desire was not available.

Through the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century, terms such as 'homosexual', 'invert' and 'Uranian' came to be applied to men who sexually desired other men, with some beginning to self-identify within these categories. Medical discourses framed inversion, for example, as a congenital condition, creating a distinction between those who chose to participate in homosexual behaviours ('perverts') and those who experienced homosexual desire as an innate and essential element of their being ('inverts') (Houlbrook, 2006). Homosexual sex continued to be viewed as morally wrong, sinful, criminal and/or pathological, but for some the desire to participate in such acts was now seen as beyond their control. It remained a behaviour in which one should refrain from participating but was now also described as a desire some could not avoid experiencing and an element of a categorical human type. Implicit in any such framing was a specific distinction between normal/heterosexual and abnormal/homosexual.

By the 1950s, 'the homosexual' was firmly established as a distinct identity category. Into the second half of the twentieth century, another distinct shift saw increasing numbers of men and women in the West willing both to self-identify as homosexual and to protest against the framing of that identity as an indicator of perversity or criminality. In the United States, groups such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis began to frame homosexual men and lesbians as members of an oppressed group who deserved better treatment by the broader society (D'Emilio, 1989). Critical to the arguments of such groups was the notion that sexual identity was not a matter of

personal choice. From small and uncertain beginnings, a progressively more assertive and vocal activist movement – which would adopt the label 'gay' – emerged on the basis of individual identities increasingly connected to a broader coalition or community of similarly identifying men and women.

In many large Western cities, emerging alongside these activist groups were urban communities that became publicly visible as homosexual spaces (Levine, 1979; Brown, 2013). A collective sense of belonging was spatially constituted, often in inner-city areas that underwent a process of gentrification through their colonisation by gay men (Knopp, 1998), in particular, but also lesbians, albeit less visibly (Rothenberg, 1995). These areas acted both as residential neighbourhoods as well as housing a range of commercial and community organisations that specifically – and openly – catered to varied lesbian and gay clientele (Collins, 2004). In Sydney, Australia, for example, from the 1960s onwards, Oxford Street and the neighbouring suburbs of Darlinghurst, Surry Hills and Paddington became known as home to lesbian and – especially – gay communities (Wotherspoon, 1991). These spaces represented a collective sense of belonging based on sexual identities. Living as gay or lesbian now incorporated a great deal more than a simple preference for sexual or romantic partners of the same gender. It was now possible to perform those identities through participation in a shared culture.

It is important to note that while we have depicted in broad brushstrokes the development of modern sexual identities, a more detailed examination would locate specific differences, meanings and identity formations in particular locations across the globe (Browne et al., 2007). As argued above, sexual identities are geographically and historically constituted and will therefore shift across both place and time. Although homosexuality became a widely discussed and controversial topic in Britain in the 1950s, for example, and sex between consenting male adults was decriminalised there in 1967, any such discussion was extremely limited in 1950s Australia where decriminalisation would only occur on a state-by-state basis over the course of three decades from the 1970s to the 1990s (Willett, 1997). While, as we will discuss below, globalisation would encourage a sense of belonging to a global or international homosexual community, local factors have been critical in how, when and why sexual identities have emerged in specific locations around the world.

Into the 1990s, it is arguable that minority sexual identities experienced both consolidation and splintering, a contradiction perhaps reflected in tensions between modernist narratives of progress and the postmodern rejection of such narratives. In the West, lesbian and gay identities were increasingly included within consumerist discourses (Willett, 2000). Advertisements specifically targeted towards lesbians and gay men, for example, aimed to reach

what was considered a potentially lucrative market. For some, this was seen as an indicator of progress and a point of success for activists whose goal was to create visibility for (and acknowledgement of) lesbians and gays in and by the broader society. To others, this represented the death of radical lesbian and gay cultures (Duggan, 2002). Such advertisements may have represented a form of belonging to society, but this belonging was predicated on the ability – and desire – to participate in a consumerist society (for further discussion of the links between identity, belonging and consumption, see Chapter 13).

Thus, what may present as progress for some represents a failure to others, a contradiction which may call into question a sense of belonging based on sexual identity. Queer theorists have, in fact, worked to disrupt identities and to complicate what may otherwise be seen as essentialist categories (Jagose, 1996; Sullivan, 2003). Emerging initially in the 1990s, queer theory is a field of critical inquiry which specifically resists definition but which can be seen as a means of challenging and questioning fixed notions of sexual or gender identity. Although 'queer' has come to be used by some as an identity label, queer theory seeks to highlight fluidity and complexity, suggesting broader possibilities than the binary of heterosexual/homosexual and resisting sexual and gender labelling. Queer theory also challenges heteronormativity, encouraging analysis which seeks out difference and which, rather than placing non-heterosexual identities as an alternative 'other' that differs from a fixed heterosexual 'norm', instead investigates fluid processes of identity performance.

Although queer theory has successfully encouraged greater complexity and diversity in the ways in which academics and others discuss sexual identities, the fact remains that many people continue to self-identify within a particular category (Hammack and Cohler, 2011). In recent years, acronyms such as LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) have been enacted as a means of describing a community (or coalition of communities) of non-heterosexual and gender-diverse populations. Absent from these labels are a range of identities developed in non-Western contexts, again suggesting the importance of understanding sexuality as geographically and historically constituted (Johnston and Longhurst, 2010). Below, we consider how these identities operate among processes of globalisation.

### Globalised identities

If we understand sexual identities as spatially constituted the question then arises as to how sexuality operates as an identity in an increasingly globalised world. Is it possible to feel a sense of identity and belonging to a minority sexual or gender community that is imagined globally, rather than – or

as well as – locally? If so, what form does such an identity take? And how does it – or can it – accommodate the diversity and complexity of identities developed in different local, national or regional contexts? Jon Binnie has argued that 'the notion that lesbians and gay men across national borders share a common identity and sense of solidarity has a very particular appeal to many' (Binnie, 2004, p. 37). However, Binnie finds this notion ultimately unsustainable in the face of global differences. A tension exists, therefore, between a shared sense of identity and belonging as imagined by many global queers and the operation of sexuality as a mode of identity experienced differently across territories and scales.

Political theorist and activist Dennis Altman noted in 1996 that, across various parts of the globe, 'in the past two decades there has emerged a definable group of self-identified homosexuals – to date many more men than women – who see themselves as part of a global community, whose commonalities override but do not deny those of race and nationality' (Altman, 1996, p. 424). To Altman, this form of sexual identity was adopted from Western – most particularly, American – gay identities and then adapted in various regions in specifically local ways. As a result, growing numbers of people were expressing a desire to 'live as homosexuals in the western sense of that term' (Altman, 1996, p. 425). To Altman, this was not occurring through the simplistic replication of Western models but through potential adaptations of Western identity politics into 'something new and unpredictable' (Altman, 1996, p. 433).

Altman's arguments have been highly influential in encouraging ways of thinking about globalised sexual identities and in seeking nuanced means of understanding the adoption or adaption of Western modes of being, becoming and belonging. The argument that modern homosexual identities reflect the influence of Western ideas on non-Western 'traditional' sexual values has, however, been the subject of substantial critique and debate, most recently from queer theorists who seek a decentring of the West as the origin point of sexual globalisation.

As stated above (and discussed in Chapter 4), queer theory seeks to disrupt and complicate any binary division between, say, heterosexual/homosexual, male/female and, in this case, Western/non-Western. Natalie Oswin has critiqued Altman's work in these terms, arguing against distinct lines which position Western and modern sexual identity models as dominant over non-Western and traditional views (Oswin, 2006). To Oswin, by decentring the West, 'the supposition of a universal gayness manifesting itself in locally relevant forms is replaced by the recognition of distinct differences between modes of being queer in various locales' (Oswin, 2006, p. 782). Oswin argues that the globalisation of sexual identities should be understood as processes

of emerging and merging which reflect less the dominance of one particular territory as they do mutual constitution across territories.

A critical element of globalised (or globalising) sexual identities is the concept of queer mobilities (Binnie, 2004; Gorman-Murray, 2009). With advances in technologies has come the ability for many global citizens to travel – either physically or virtually – across, within and through national borders. Sexual identities often play a central role in how or why people travel, thus enabling or constituting particular modes of mobility while also setting specific limitations to mobility. Persecution of sexual minorities may cause people to flee their home state, for example, while certain nation-states maintain border control policies that deny access to openly queer individuals (ILGA, 2013).

Studies of international migration have recently taken what Mai and King have described as a 'sexual turn' (Mai and King, 2009, p. 296). Heavily influenced by queer theory, this sexual turn has placed migrants as sexual beings, noting the influences of sexual identity (including heterosexual identity) on processes and experiences of migration. Such a framing allows for the importance of sexual and emotional desires as factors in decisions to migrate or in how people experience the places and spaces in and through which they migrate (Gorman-Murray, 2007; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2011). Critically, such studies may highlight migrations from or within non-Western nations, thus disrupting any framing of sexual identities as only ever flowing out from the West (Yue, 2008, 2012; Smith, 2012).

Tourism studies have similarly noted the importance of sexuality within processes of global mobility (Waitt and Markwell, 2006; Waitt et al., 2008). Jasbir Puar, for example, has noted tensions between the expectations of mobility by queer Western tourists and the framing by some nation-states of homosexuality as a pernicious element of colonial or neo-colonial Western influences (Puar, 2002). When a cruise ship carrying 900 gay and lesbian passengers was denied docking privileges by a British territory, the Cayman Islands, a substantial controversy arose which eventually involved British prime minister Tony Blair. Puar sees the gay and lesbian populations involved – both those on the ship and local Cayman Island residents – as pawns in 'an oppositional conflict between postcolonial and former colonizing governments' (Puar, 2002, p. 127). While Puar argues that the circumstances of this conflict 'may or may not be about sexuality' (Puar, 2002, p. 127), the differing experiences of sexual identity between Western tourists and local residents would seem to highlight the complexity and tensions within globalised queer identities.

The operation of multinational companies in a globalised economy may also at times highlight these tensions. Internet technology company Google, for example, announced in 2012 the launch of a campaign titled 'Legalize

Love: LGBT Rights Are Human Rights' (Google, 2012). As described by Google, the aim of this effort was 'to ensure that all of our employees have the same inclusive experience outside of the office as they do at work'. The campaign specifically targets nations that criminalise same-sex behaviours, bringing the weight of its substantial economic power to bear on governments around the globe. A Google representative has reportedly explained the company's targeting of Singapore, for example, by stating, 'Singapore wants to be a global financial center and world leader and we can push them on the fact that being a global center and a world leader means you have to treat all people the same, irrespective of their sexual orientation' (Peirano, 2012). Thus, a globalised economy and globalised sexual identities become specifically interwoven as configured by a multinational company.

Such efforts have, at times, placed queer identities as points of conflict in nation-states resisting globalising forces by projecting a specific nationalist identity (Binnie, 2004). The nation-state in these instances becomes defined by its refusal to admit non-heterosexual citizenship within its identity as a nation, thus basing that identity on the heterosexual family (Oswin, 2012). European unification is a prominent case in point (O'Dwyer and Schwartz, 2009). Accession to the European Union (EU) is predicated on acceptance of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, which includes antidiscrimination protections for LGBT individuals. In countries such as Poland and Latvia, a significant anti-LGBT backlash has resisted these laws, invoking nationalised identities (defined as local, traditional and heterosexual) in opposition to the regionalising forces of the EU (defined as foreign, modern and queer) (see also Waitt, 2005, on sexual citizenship and gay geographies in Latvia).

Global experiences of HIV/AIDS represent another critical element of globalised sexual identities. As argued by Jon Binnie, 'The global AIDS pandemic had been crucial in bringing questions around the globalization of sexuality to the fore in debates within social theory' (Binnie, 2004, p. 109). This pandemic encompasses many of the issues central to globalised sexual identities. As a sexually transmissible illness frequently described in terms of its ability to spread across national borders, AIDS signifies sexual mobilities and challenges to the nation-state. Binnie describes AIDS as a 'postmodern virus' because of its challenges to discourses of progress and development, including medical and scientific progress; paths towards gay liberation by modern gay identities and the development strategies of developing nations (Binnie, 2004, p. 113).

Significantly, AIDS has also prompted and encouraged the development of coalitionist sexual activism across national borders, thus encouraging a sense of globalised sexual identity and belonging (Binnie, 2004). Among disparate sexual and gender minority populations, global queer activism can inspire feelings of participation in a common struggle against a common enemy.

The relevance of issues such as national legislative environments and locally constituted understandings of gender and sexual identity may mean, however, that queer activism will differ substantially across the globe. Same-sex marriage, for example, has become a central focus for activism in countries in which homosexual sex has been decriminalised, including the United States, Great Britain and Australia. In areas of the Global South, the criminalisation of homosexual acts means that activists work in very different environments and must target their activism in different ways. Recently passed legislation in Uganda, for example, has resulted in the possibility of life imprisonment for 'serial offenders' found guilty of participating in homosexual sex (Karimi and Thompson, 2014). Below, we examine the significance of an international LGBTI rights organisation, arguing for both the value and complexity of global activism which embody a particular vision of identity based on sexuality.

*The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA)*

The Internet is a global technology with the capacity to compress distances and to foster a sense of shared identity among geographically diverse populations. This is particularly the case for sexual and gender minorities who often fear reprisals if they reveal their identities in offline spaces and who may therefore seek connection, information and relationships online (DeHaan et al., 2013). As argued by Jon Binnie, 'Cyberspace offers the utopian prospect of escape and self-realization, a means of experimenting with sexual identity and searching for community' (Binnie, 2004, p. 42). Online spaces targeted at or created by LGBTI communities may include dating or sex 'hook-up' sites, LGBTI news publications, activist sites, community health information and social media. In this section, we examine the Internet presence of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), highlighting the ways in which such an online space may embody and encourage a globalised sense of belonging based on minority sexual or gender identity. We argue that the creation of such a space is both politically valuable and inherently problematic. In encouraging a sense of solidarity, ILGA allows potentially isolated and marginalised individuals to feel part of a larger community. It remains important, however, to acknowledge the privileges and inequities that exist within this community and to allow for complexity and diversity in the way that community is imagined into being.

Founded in 1978, ILGA currently declares itself the 'only worldwide federation campaigning for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex rights'

(ILGA, 2013). While the ILGA Secretariat is based in Belgium and Switzerland, the organisation asserts its claim to global impact and influence through its 1044 member organisations located in 117 different countries. According to the ILGA website, the federation's aim is to:

work for the equality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people and their liberation from all forms of discrimination. We seek to achieve this aim through the world-wide cooperation and mutual support of our members. (ILGA, 2013)

ILGA pursues its mission through diplomatic advocacy, political activism and provision of information and support to LGBTI and 'mainstream' populations.

The ILGA website is a significant information portal which details legislative impacts on LGBTI lives across the globe, links to current news articles, provides services to ILGA member organisations, seeks donations, promotes participation in activist events and campaigns and encourages individuals to share their own stories of LGBTI life.

On many of the pages of the ILGA website, it is possible for readers to post a comment via the social networking site Facebook. This facility encourages a sense of participation and solidarity, through which users can participate in a global activist community based on sexual and gender identity. On 9 October 2011, a Facebook user identified as 'Lloyd Love' posted a comment to the 'About ILGA' page of the site that read in full, 'We are as ONE'. The brief comment can be read in a number of ways but seems most clearly to suggest a globalised sense of identity, through which the struggles, experiences, activism and desires of all LGBTI people are understood as an element of a singular and cohesive community.

In many ways, this post sums up a particular vision of belonging based on a specifically globalised sense of sexual identity. It also suggests both how an organisation such as ILGA may encourage such a sense of belonging and how that organisation is imagined into being by members of the online community it forms. Throughout its publications, including its website, ILGA stresses its internationality and inclusivity, encouraging a feeling for the reader that – no matter their national identity – they are part of a common struggle based on their minority sexual or gender identity. Significant tension exists, however, in what would seem at first to be a simple yet powerful statement of unified goals and dreams. A politically potent voice may be developed through such unity, but for whom does it speak? Who is the 'we' in that statement? Does this unified voice allow for complexity and difference within its vision of solidarity or does it enforce a particular set of normativities?

These tensions have led to critiques of ILGA by activists and academics who fear that, in encouraging a uniform sense of identity and belonging, the organisation is in fact enforcing Westernised values and opinions. Martin Manalansan, for example, has argued that ILGA, through its publications and conferences, has displayed 'a tendency to deploy monolithic constructions of gayness and gay liberation' (Manalansan, 1995, p. 429). To Manalansan, this reflects a Eurocentric imagining of 'gay' which fails to include or acknowledge the full range of minority sexual or gender identities experienced by many of the people for whom ILGA claims to speak.

ILGA's organisational structure, as displayed on its website, appears to respond to such critiques via divisions into particular regional and gendered groupings. The website includes separate pages for each of ILGA's regional groups (Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and Caribbean, North America and Oceania) as well as its Women's and Trans Secretariats. While maintaining a goal of global cooperation, these organisational groupings allow for at least some degree of difference and complexity by suggesting, for example, that the experiences of sexual and gender minority populations in Africa will be different from those in Europe. Differences within each of these regions may be less successfully catered for through such a strategy; however, ILGA's news postings and legislative updates do highlight national specificities and diversity of experience.

The difficulty of both encouraging solidarity and acknowledging diversity is noted on the 'Your Story' page of the ILGA site. This page encourages users to contribute posts describing their own stories of 'What LGBTI life is like in reality'. ILGA's request for users to add stories to the page states, 'Let others know what it's like to be LGBTI in your country! If an experience is meaningful for you, it will probably be meaningful for someone else' (ILGA, 2013). This request acknowledges that national differences will create diverse experiences by specifically asking about 'your country', while simultaneously encouraging a feeling of belonging by asserting that these experiences may also 'be meaningful for someone else'. Thus, nationally or regionally diverse experiences may find commonality of meaning when read in the context of this site based on the shared sense of belonging encouraged within the site.

Uniformity may also be encouraged or enforced through the use of the identity label LGBTI, a label which may not be applicable or uniformly understood within diverse regions. In a study of tensions between global discourses and local 'realities' in Bangladesh, Dina Siddiqi argues that 'global identity categories such as ... gay/lesbian are too narrow to capture the fluid and highly context-specific ways in which gender and sexually nonconforming persons understand themselves' (Siddiqi, 2011). The use of LGBTI by ILGA,

while designed to be inclusive of diverse experiences, may in fact exclude some who feel no attachment to such labels.

Peter Nardi argues for the possibility that, rather than seeking or enforcing a uniform homosexual identity, ILGA instead seeks a form of political unity that allows for societal pluralism (Nardi, 1998). Writing in 1998, Nardi frames the goals of global LGBTI activism as an attempt to uncover 'the inequalities linked to the privileges and assumptions of hegemonic heterosexuality' (Nardi, 1998, p. 584). Framed in this way, ILGA's goals can be seen less as an attempt to enforce a particular, uniform imagining of LGBTI identity and more as an attempt to disrupt a global imagining of universal heterosexuality. Rather than suggesting that a global LGBTI community will or should experience non-heterosexual identities in similar ways, ILGA instead seeks space to advocate for the needs of non-heterosexual citizens within diverse global constituencies.

Nardi's argument acknowledges the potential political value of an organisation such as ILGA; however, acknowledgement should also be made of the privileges and inequities that will be present in any such organisation. As argued by Jon Binnie and Christian Klesse, 'Because solidarity needs to bridge unequal territories of power, ... everyday experiences of activism are rarely free from tensions' (Binnie and Klesse, 2012, p. 456). Within a global LGBTI community, certain members will experience privilege based on issues such as race, ethnicity, class and gender. Potential exists that within globalised activism the privileged 'speak for' the voiceless, rather than creating a space in which the previously silenced are now able to speak for themselves.

Hakan Seckinelgin has highlighted potential problems with the feeling of solidarity that can be generated by the news media and Internet technologies (Seckinelgin, 2012). Seckinelgin argues that 'cosmopolitan intimacies emerge at the juncture of events unfolding and the people observing them from a distance' (Seckinelgin, 2012, p. 542). News garnered through a venue such as the ILGA website may, therefore, encourage a feeling of solidarity with people we imagine to be sharing identities and experiences similar to our own. The distance between their lives and ours is compressed and simplified, viewed through an imagining of sexual or gender identity that is more relevant to us than them. Although such solidarity has the potential to create positive change, it is also possible, as argued by Seckinelgin, that 'the solidarity created from a distance creates challenges for those who are constructed as people like us' (Seckinelgin, 2012, p. 542).

In terms of a sense of belonging fostered in a venue such as the ILGA website, it is also important to note that particular technologies – such as computers or other devices with Internet access – are necessary in order to participate in the site as a forum. Whether through insufficient incomes



required to afford technology, an absence of necessary local infrastructure or censorship regimes which monitor and restrict access to particular sites, many of the members of the global community seemingly embodied by the ILGA website are, in fact, unable to access that site. In seeking to understand how a globalised sense of sexual or gender identity may be embodied or encouraged through the Internet, it is important to remember that the Internet is inequitably accessible across the globe (for further discussion, see Chapter 14).

Nonetheless, ILGA's online presence performs a potentially important role in providing information, connection and a feeling of belonging to and among geographically diverse populations. The site can be seen as embodying the problematic interplay between the political (and emotional) value of solidarity and the critical importance of acknowledging privilege, diversity and complexity. Ultimately, it is likely that when seeking a sense of belonging and identity through this site, each user brings their own vision of sexual or gender identity understood through and constituted by local contexts. A global community is imagined into being in a way that provides a feeling of belonging and assumes similarities across and through distance, difference and diversity.

### Case study: heterosexual identity and the 'straight ally'

Scholarly interest in sexuality has tended to focus on desires and identities that sit outside what might be considered the heterosexual 'mainstream'. Researchers have, however, begun to take an increasing interest in how heterosexuality itself operates as a form of identity and belonging (Hubbard, 2000; Little, 2003). As argued by Hubbard, there is value in exploring 'the many possible articulations of heterosexual desire that are included or excluded within a dominant construction of heteronormativity' (Hubbard, 2008, p. 645). Once positioned as a cohesive norm, the label 'heterosexual' is increasingly understood as covering a broad variety of identities that are regulated and performed in diverse and complex ways.

The 'straight ally' is an interesting case in point. This identity label may be adopted by or applied to 'straight identified individuals who are supportive advocates for the LGBT Community through their activism, involvement or their nature to speak out against oppression and inequality' (LGBT Resource Center USC). A range of campaigns, often focusing on social media, have encouraged heterosexual people to publicly identify as a straight ally, including 'Straight for Equality' (PFLAG, 2012) and 'Straight but Not Narrow' (SBNN, 2010, <http://www.straightbutnotnarrow.org/>).

As an identity marker, 'straight ally' reveals the inherent complexity of (hetero)sexual identities. By including the word 'straight' the label acts

as a specific and public identification as heterosexual. However, the label equally suggests a sense of identity and belonging developed through alliance with LGBTI groups and in opposition to some heterosexual people. There is an implicit suggestion that some heterosexual identities incorporate or are defined by anti-LGBTI attitudes. The 'straight ally' rejects such attitudes while still firmly declaring a heterosexual identity. This is a form of heterosexuality defined as both different from and aligned with LGBTI identities, which is at once the same as but in opposition to some heterosexual identities. The heterosexual/homosexual binary is simultaneously perpetuated and complicated in a process that emphasises fixed sexual and gender identities while also creating a sense of belonging across difference.

## Conclusion

Although ostensibly defined by the gender of our sexual object choice, sexuality as an individual and collective category of identity and belonging has come to represent far more. Through sexual identity we may participate in a community enacted materially within particular urban spaces or virtually in the online world. Sexual identities may constitute our place as citizens of a nation-state; as migrants across national borders; or as members of a global activist coalition. Sexual identity may enable a sense of belonging to a community of shared desire or may represent an exclusion from nationalist mythologies. The rights of minority sexual and gender identity populations remain contested and controversial across the globe. Nonetheless, the emergence and (re)formation of these identities since the nineteenth century has significantly altered how sex and sexuality are placed in discourse and enacted as sites of identity and belonging.

## Questions for students

- Thinking about your own sexual identity, in what ways do you feel a sense of belonging with people who share that identity? In what ways do you feel a sense of difference?
- Do you perform your sexual identity differently as you move through different spaces? If yes, how? Are there spaces in which you feel freer to identify in particular ways than in other spaces?
- What role do governments play in regulating identities based on sexuality (including heterosexual identity)? How does sexuality operate differently across nation-states?
- In what ways does sexual identity operate differently for people of your generation as opposed to, say, your parents' generation?

### Recommended reading

- Binnie, Jon. (2004) *The Globalization of Sexuality* (London: Sage).  
 Brown, Michael P. (2000) *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe* (London: Routledge).  
 Browne, Kath, Brown, Gavin, and Lim, Jason. (2007) *Geographies of Sexualities* (Ashgate: Farnham).  
 Johnston, Lynda and Longhurst, Robyn. (2010) *Space, Place and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield).

## CHAPTER 6

# Youth

Amie Matthews

### Introduction

We saw it [going travelling] as just, the only time before mortgages, before kids, before anything else. To just ... *leave*.

(Emily, age 23)

I wanted to go overseas before I had any commitments. Many of my friends just want to find Mr Right, settle into a good job and pop out a couple of kids. And that's great for *them*. I just want a few more experiences before I settle down.

(Erin, age 22)

One of the things that really influences me is a fear of settling down and waking up years later, not having done the things that I want to do. Travel sort of prevents me from falling into this 'trap'.

(Scott, age 22)

The above statements, which are extracted from interviews with young Australian travellers, are demonstrative of the types of reflexive identity construction many young people are engaged in today. Drawn from studies of the global backpacking culture, which examine travel as a rite of passage in the lives of contemporary Western youth (for further discussion see Matthews, 2008; Matthews, 2014), these interviewee reflections associate global mobility with an accumulation of experience and, simultaneously, the deferral of responsibility. What is clear from this is that international travel is seen as a means of embracing opportunity and crafting a future personhood, or adult self, which is both experienced and, importantly, fulfilled. One gets the sense that such future fulfilment rests on making the most of youth by making the 'right' choices. Indeed, travel is constructed here as a youthful choice – as an alternative to 'settling down' or to the decisions (mortgage, house, career and kids) that are deemed symbolic of adult status. These observations hint then not just at the cultural significance of travel for members of the backpacking